Baccalaureate Address May 8, 2009



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Scripture Readings

- Selections from Exodus 3 and 4
- Psalm 22:25-31
- John 15:1-8

Her name was Helen Metz. I met her one month after I turned six, but I had been dreaming about her for many weeks. I imagined her as something of a grandmother—loving, forgiving, wise, generous with her embrace, a bit of a disciplinarian, always there when you need her.

We met early in the morning on the first day I walked into my first grade classroom. Helen Metz was Miss Metz, my first grade teacher. Within moments I knew I had dreamed accurately; she kneeled on the floor to look me in the eye when we were introduced, she opened her arms wide for a hug, she showed me where to put the things I carried in my arms (this was long ago in the days before there were backpacks), she introduced me to a couple of other kids, and then she went on her way to meet others. She was everything I had dreamed of, yet more.

Once all the children had arrived, Miss Metz called us together to begin the school day. Nervous as we were we immediately followed her instruction to hush our voices. She took a chair and sat in front of this gathering of six year olds. For a moment she looked at each of us, and then she spoke.

And in that very moment – early in my first day in first grade – this loving, wise, and generous grandmotherly-type teacher spoke words I did not fully understand yet I remember to this day. She welcomed us to her classroom and to first grade, and these were her first words: "Today, class, we learn to read."

Those words marked me that day in a way I have never forgotten. I had grown up in a home which had very few books, especially books for children. I had never imagined that in first grade I would learn to read, that I would learn to interpret the strange markings on a page. Helen Metz promised me the impossible.

And so through the miracle of Helen Metz by the end of my first day in first grade I knew a vast new world, it was the world of Dick, Jane, and their dog, Spot—a world you've not heard of but which your parents know well. As I learned to read better and better that year Miss Metz introduced me to books on the shelves of her classroom, and then she showed me all the books on the shelves of the school library, and by the end of the year she even gave me two books of my own.

Miss Metz, this loving, wise, and generous grandmotherly-type teacher marked me forever with these words – "Today, class, we learn to read." Each year after that, on the first day of school (and I've been in school now for a long, long time!), I think of Helen Metz and the new world to which she granted me entrance. I love to learn because Miss Metz—this loving, generous, something-of-a-grandmother teacher—believed in me enough to promise that on the first day of first grade I would learn to read.

Some 25 years later, when I was nearing completion of my doctoral studies, I had the great joy of meeting Miss Metz again. Was I in for a shock! She was still loving, still wise, and still generous just as I had remembered her to be. But on meeting her again, now 25 years later, I discovered that when Helen Metz marked me forever that first day of first grade she was no grandmother. No, though she looked quite old to this six year kid, and though I had always remembered her as the grandmotherly type, she was really a young woman when I knew her. In fact, after talking with Miss Metz and reminding her of her first words to our class she startled me by telling me that the day we first met in the classroom – the day which was my first day in first grade – the day she marked me in a way I've never forgotten – that day was also the first day of Helen Metz's first job after graduating from college.

This changes everything in my story, of course. On that morning of my first day in first grade Miss Metz had no idea what she was doing. Now I know that she hadn't slept much of the night before. Now I know she had butterflies in her stomach that morning and she almost couldn't keep down her breakfast when she bent to greet me. Now I know she had to sit on the chair in front of us to keep her knees from knocking together. Now I know that when she went home that night and her friends asked her how the day had gone she said, "I was so nervous I promised them the impossible, that they would learn to read in one day." And then she added, "I even have one sweet little boy who seemed to actually believe me." Now I know she wondered whether parents would be in the principal's office the next morning complaining about her ineptitude. She changed my life on that first day of first grade at the very moment she thought everything had gone wrong.

Now, I don't know whether you've picked up on it yet (after all, your brains must be a bit like mush after your last final exams), but Helen Metz and Moses have a lot in common. That's Helen Metz, my first grade teacher, the woman who marked me forever with a promise to learn to read; and Moses, the man whose story Sarah read just a few minutes ago.

Moses was a young college graduate; OK, I don't really know this, but indulge me with a little poetic license. Moses was a young, newly married man, this we do know, wandering in the field taking care of some sheep. In the pasture he saw a bush that was burning, and curious as all recent college graduates are he hurried over to see what was happening. While checking out this bush that was burning, Moses evidently had a conversation with God, and through that conversation he discovered that having a talk with God sometimes leads to a very challenging outcome.

God had a special assignment for Moses, just as God had a special assignment for Helen Metz. She needed to teach a group of first graders to read, and he needed to lead a group of restless disorganized people from captivity to freedom. This assignment was more than Moses was looking for at this time in his life as a recent college graduate responsible for shepherding his father-in-law's flock of sheep. So Moses asked God, "Who am I?" In our day, we'd simply ask, "Why me? What makes you think I'm up to the task?"

God's reply was simple. "I'll be with you." Four words; we can all remember them. "I'll be with you." The conversation between God and Moses continues but Moses still isn't convinced. And so God asks Moses a simple question. "What's that in your hand?" This proved to be the defining question, the tipping point, in Moses' entire life.

What's that in your hand? What Moses had in his hand is something we don't commonly use today unless we're on a long hike in the mountains. Moses called it a staff; we would call it a walking stick, an instrument to give him balance, to hold him upright when his feet might slip on the rough terrain. In Moses' day there were no paved roads, no sidewalks of concrete, no smooth lawns, no stairs to climb from lower ground to higher ground, no pleasant path through the Chicago forest preserve. Moses needed a walking stick.

But it was more than this, of course. The staff Moses held in his hand defined who he was. It was marked from the breadth of experience encountered over the few years in his young man's life. The walking stick was made smooth on the high end by the constant rub of Moses' hand. And the walking stick was fractured on the lower end by the rough terrain over which Moses had walked during the course of his young life. Moses knew his walking stick and the staff knew Moses.

So here's the essence of this encounter between God and Moses. A task is assigned by God, a promise is made by God to be with Moses, and then God declares that the events of Moses' young life to that point had prepared him for the assignment. Here's the job; I'll be with you; you're prepared.

Prepared for what? Well, in words from Jesus read minutes ago by Marcus, prepared to be a branch in a vine or a bush that bears fruit. Prepared to be a branch in a bush burning with passion for God. Prepared to be a branch bearing fruit of whatever type God has proclaimed to be good, sweet or bitter, with seeds or seedless.

Here's the job; I'll be with you; you're prepared.

Prepared for what? Well, in words common to North Park University, prepared for a life of significance and service. This was true for Moses, and it was true for Helen Metz. And it is true for you today.

Now I'm almost done and this is where you really need to listen. I'm going to tell you two important things we haven't yet told you at North Park; we've saved them for this very moment.

There are two secrets about a life of significance and service that at North Park we intentionally save for your last night as a North Park student.

The first secret is this: significance and service happens with the big things in your life only if you are first faithful in achieving significance and service with the little things in your life. Listen to Jesus' words read minutes ago by Marcus: "Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit." Or paraphrased just slightly, "Every branch that bears small fruit in the little things, he prunes to bear bigger fruit in the big things." Start small and God will move you along to the big things when you're ready.

And here's the second secret: Every life of significance and service begins in the same way. It began this way for Moses. It began this way for Helen Metz. It began this way for any person whose commitments in life you respect. Every life of significance and service begins this way: you grasp your walking stick and then you take the first step.

God has a job for you; God will be with you; you're prepared.

Tomorrow is graduation day at North Park University. Now pick up your walking stick, take your first step, and watch out for the guy with the pruning shears.